LETTERS TO A LADY,

EMBODYING

A Popular Sketch of the History of Architecture,

AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF

THE VARIOUS STYLES WHICH HAVE PREVAILED.*

My dear Sorillah:

I SIT down to commence this my sixth communication to you in an old cathedral town, and in face of one of the most exquisite productions of our mediæval artists. The sun, which tips with light, pinnacle, and panelling, and gargoyl, has also filled with rich shadow the holes and recesses cunningly formed to receive it: the whole surface is full of life and motion; thought and intention are visible everywhere; the mind of the old workers peeps out at every corner, and the mind of the looker-on is filled and satisfied. Had our review reached the period of the production of structures of this character, the glorious object before me, blackened, and battered, and decaying as it is, would prompt to a more forcible depiction of its principles, peculiarities, and beauty, than I could otherwise produce. This, however, must be deferred: we are but on "the margin of the inky flood," and must not over-sail our subject. Where were we? We have spoken of

> ——— "The Eternal Pyramids,
> Memphis and Thebes, and whatsoe'er of strange,
> Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,
> Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphinx,
> Dark Ethiopia on her desert hills
> Conceals;"—

and have now to talk of Greece. "Greek art," says Kugler, "sprang from Greek religion. It was art which gave the gods form, character, and reality. The statue of Jupiter Olympius brought the Father of the Gods himself before the eyes of men. He was deemed unfortunate who died without beholding that statue. Art, among the Greeks, was an occupation of a priestly character: as it belonged to her to lift the veil of mystery which concealed the gods, so was it also her office to exalt and consecrate the human forms under which they could alone be represented. The image of the god was no mere copy from common and variable life; it was stamped with a supernatural grandeur, which raised the mind to a higher world." But her arts had an infancy, and to this let us look, confining ourselves to *architecture*.

Amongst the earliest constructions of masonry which remain to us, are those which have been termed indifferently by writers, *Cyclopean* and *Pelasgic*. The characteristics of this mode of construction are, that the walls are formed in some cases of enormous masses of irregularly-shaped stones, piled together without mortar, and having the interstices filled in with smaller stones; and in others, that the stones are polygonal, with their various angles carefully hewn, so as to correspond, without mortar, with those which are contiguous, and not admit smaller stones to fill up. Sir William Gell, who diligently investigated the subject, maintains that only the *first*-described method should be called Cyclopean—the second, Pelasgic; and, moreover, asserts, that this latter mode, although evidently the more artificial and scientific of the two, was practised several hundred years before the Cyclopean manner. Thus, he says, that the Pelasgi built and walled Lycosura 1800 years B.C.; that Argos was founded about 56 years earlier even, and was decidedly a Pelasgian city; and that Tiryns was fortified by foreign artists from Lycia, called Cyclopes, above 400 years later.

The question is surrounded by difficulties, and must be left unsettled; but this will not distress you. One of the most noted examples of the Cyclopean construction is the Gate of the Lions, at Mycenæ.

The doorcase there is formed of two massive upright blocks of stone, covered with another, which is 15 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 6 feet 7 inches high. Upon this stands a triangular stone, 12 feet long, 10 feet high, and 2 feet thick; on the face of which two lions, with their fore-legs resting on a round pillar or altar, are sculptured in low relief. The jambs (as the sides of a doorway are called) slope inward toward the top, coinciding with the Egyptian mode. Mycenæ is, unquestionably, of most remote antiquity.

The walls of Tiryns afford another instance of this mode of construction; the date of their erection is uncertain, but must be very early, as they are alluded to (in terms of commendation) by Homer. Gell says 1400 years B.C.: others, earlier.

In later instances of Cyclopean work, it must be remarked, the stones are squared, and are laid in courses of varying thickness, but without mortar.

Who the Pelasgi were,—whence they came, has been the subject of much celebrated controversy. Some have thought them Egyptians; some Phœnicians; some that they were indigenous. It seems tolerably clear, that they were a hardy people, who migrated at a very early period from Asia Minor, and made themselves masters of various countries. I have little doubt they were identical with the Phœnicians. The Etrusci were, perhaps, the same people.

Some recent writers maintain that Ireland was peopled by the same tribes, and support the opinion with strong arguments. Cecrops, who founded Athens 1556 years B.C. was long considered to have been the leader of a band of Egyptian emigrants. And although, more recently, learned men have shown reasons why this may be untrue, I am content, on various grounds, to assent to this belief. Whether he was so or not, is not very important for our purpose. There is abundant evidence of the early connection between Egypt and Greece, and of the obligations of the latter to the former.

Ancient history is positively such a complicated web of contradictions and errors, as to baffle all attempts at disentanglement. Nor will this surprise any person who has endeavoured to chronicle an event, however recent. The rapidity with which facts are forgotten or perverted, is so great, that we may be surprised rather that we have so much that is apparently consistent and truth-*like*, if not true, than that much is obscured by the accumulated mists in which Time makes a point of shrouding the past.

In the Homeric times, which may be dated 900 years B.C. architecture would seem to have acquired some degree of excellence and importance in Greece; even if we make due allowance for the glowing colours of the poet. He calls it the gift of Minerva;—

> "For loved by Pallas, Pallas did impart
> To him the shipwright's and the builder's art."

Columns, metallic decorations, coloured cornices, and silver pillars, shine in his descriptions. The account of Priam's palace gives an idea of accommodation and even magnificence. He says, if we follow Pope,—

> "And now to Priam's stately courts he came,
> Raised on arch'd columns of stupendous frame,
> On these a range of marble structure runs,
> The rich pavilions of his fifty sons,
> In fifty chambers lodged, and-rooms of state
> Opposed to those, where Priam's daughters sate,
> Twelve domes for them and their loved spouses shone;
> Of equal beauty and of polished stone."

We must not attach to any of these words exactly the same ideas which they now raise; and the "domes" are more than doubtful. Paris built his own residence;—

> "Himself the mansion raised from every part
> Assembling architects of matchless art:"

and Homer describes it as a pompous structure.

With the roof sloping each way from the centre, to throw off the water, he was also acquainted; for he compares Ajax and Ulysses, when wrestling, to the beams of such a construction.

Amongst the earliest edifices in Greece, are those known as *Treasuries*, which are peculiar to that country. That of Atreus, at Mycenæ, which still exists, is of a conical shape, about 48 feet in diameter. It was lined inside with plates of brass, and covered outside with earth, so as to form a mound or tumulus. I will give you a sketch of it when we come to speak of the history of the arch. In the remotest ages, two brothers, Agamedes and Trophonius, are said to have been celebrated as designers of these structures. Pausanias says that when they built the Treasury of Hyrieus, they arranged one of the stones so that they could enter when they pleased, without discovery, to remove treasure. The respectable proprietor not being able to tell how his money went (a common complaint even in our days), set a trap and succeeded in catching one of these insinuating and designing architects, when, as the story runs, the other cut off his brother's head, to prevent his own detection. For my own part, I cannot bring myself to believe anything so bad of an architect. At all events, the story is much older than the date this would give it. It is told in connection with one of the Egyptian kings, with the addition of circumstances not fitted for a lady's ears, which show that their ideas of female virtue were very different from what we entertain. I should mention, that some good archæologists think the structures I have spoken of were not treasuries, but tombs.

One of the earliest columnar structures in Greece is the ruined temple at Corinth,—perhaps *the* earliest. Colonel Leake supposes that it was erected about 800 years B.C. It is of the Doric order, of great solidity, and has very short massive columns, little more than four times the diameter in height. The diameter of the column, I should tell you in

* No. VI. See pp. 100, 134, 160, 196, and 221.

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